

Personal Preservation

Written by KAYLEE ANN JOHNSON

BEFORE I MOVED TO SAVANNAH IN 2025, I lived in New York City for six years, which was just long enough for the city to warp my sense of pace, cost, and quality of life.

During that time, I lived in multiple neighborhoods and apartments, including a brownstone in the heart of Bedford-Stuyvesant as well as a railroad-style apartment built in 1901 with floors sloped enough that you could watch a ball roll from the front of the apartment straight to the back.

In the midst of the COVID pandemic, I sublet an old East Village tenement apartment with a bathtub in the kitchen and, based on personal experience, a couple of ghosts. Much of my time in NYC was spent in my apartment, waiting out the pandemic. One day in 2022, my friend Annie sent me an application for a stone masonry apprenticeship at the historic Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn.

“You should apply,” she wrote. “It seems up your alley because you like cemeteries.” I filled out the application, trying to wrap my head around my friend’s perception of me, as I didn’t

recall ever mentioning cemeteries to her.

This moment turned out to be a turning point, both professionally and personally. I began my preservation career by doing hands-on restoration work on an 1850s mausoleum at Green-Wood. From there came graduate school at Pratt Institute, work as an architectural artisan, and eventually roles focused on advocacy and policy. I was training my brain to

see buildings not as static artifacts, but as living, breathing systems that could be adapted and reused over time.

I decided to move to Savannah and take a position as director of preservation at Historic Savannah Foundation. Savannah and New York City are both national leaders in historic preservation, so the transition made sense. I thought my new role would be an amazing opportunity to expand my experience, and I was also enticed by HSF’s commitment to community preservation.

If you think about preservation as a tool rather than an obstacle,



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it becomes incredibly practical. Preservation can provide safe and affordable housing, create a more sustainable urban environment, and honor culture and history.

There is so much to love here in Savannah, including my new apartment in the Victorian District. It was built in the late 1800s by renowned architect Alfred Eichberg, who was one of the first Jewish architects to practice in the Southeast. I appreciate the soaring ceiling heights and enormous windows — plus the fact that the apartment is more than twice the size of my old one in New York City. Savannah’s buildings, including the one I live in, survived largely because they were useful, well designed, and adaptable. They were built to respond to climate, community, and change.

Living in Savannah’s Victorian District has reinforced why I love preservation: the fact that preservation considers the past, present, and future. I am endlessly frustrated by short-term thinking and plans that prioritize immediacy and profit over longevity.

Ultimately, preservation offers a healthy balance. We have to see where we came from to know where we’re headed. For me, that understanding must be reflected in our built environment, and it must include the intangible heritage that is tied to place. After all, our stories, cultures, and communities are what give our buildings meaning in the first place.

Kaylee Ann Johnson is the new director of preservation at Historic Savannah Foundation. ❶